

Veterans Bulletin

Georgia Department of Veterans Service

Sonny Perdue
Governor

Pete Wheeler
Commissioner

Georgia Veterans...guardians of liberty
Winter 2004-2005

Georgia's Citizens Soldiers Deploy in Support of Operation Iraqi Freedom

GANG News Release January 2005

As more than 4,500 Georgia Army National Guard soldiers assigned to the 48th Mechanized Infantry Brigade bid teary-eyed farewells to their loved ones, boarded buses or queued up in camouflaged convoys, and made their way toward Fort Stewart to begin training for duty in Iraq, so began the largest Georgia Guard call-up for an overseas mission since World War II.

For many of the soldiers, it is their first mobilization. For some, however, it was déjà vu.

The brigade dispatched 1,200 of its troops to Bosnia in 2001 for eight months of peacekeeping duty. Before that, in 1990-91, during the first Gulf war, the unit was activated, but never saw action because the conflict ended so quickly.

"Georgians can be proud of the men and women of the 48th Infantry Brigade," said Brig. Gen. Stewart Rodeheaver, commander of the unit, which is headquartered in Macon. "They have shown in the past that they can accomplish the mission when their country calls, and I have no doubt they will do so once again with this important deployment."

In many of the 31 cities and towns across the state that are home to the brigade's individual unit armories, citizens turned out in force for a grand send-off.

In Griffin, the local fire department used two snorkel trucks to suspend a huge U.S. flag over the departure route used by E Troop, 108th Cavalry. Cheering townspeople lined the street, waving flags, while schoolchildren chanted, "U-S-A! U-S-A!" and a local Cub Scout Den saluted as the convoy snaked by.

In Valdosta, as the soldiers of A Company, 2nd Battalion, 121st Infantry, rumbled through town in a procession of buses and Humvees



Commissioner Wheeler greets Georgia National Guardsmen from the 48th Brigade's Griffin based Troop E, 108th CAV during the December 2004 "Supermarket of Veterans Benefits" held there at the Armory. The some 100 soldiers who were undergoing predeployment processing at the time took advantage of the information available by the some 30 state and federal agencies that participated in the annual SDVS/VA sponsored event.

past throngs of well-wishers, firefighters on cue cranked up the sirens on the town's entire fleet of trucks – a firehouse version of "Pomp and Circumstance."

While the Valdosta unit said its goodbyes, Spc. Aubrey Perry said going away is difficult. "I was thrilled to go to Kuwait in '94, but this time it's different, I have a wife and three boys and leaving them is the hardest thing I have ever done," said Perry, of Valdosta, an infantryman.

Standing nearby was his 9-year-old stepson, Chance Long, who said, simply, "I'm scared."

"I'll miss my family every day, but I know their thoughts and prayers will be with me," said Spc. Larry Shaffer of Cairo, a cabinet maker in Pelham who

serves as an infantry soldier with the Valdosta unit. He hugged his daughter, Victoria, tightly before boarding his bus.

"My family is counting on me coming home. I will not disappoint them, no matter what," said Spc. Tim Steed of Thomson, a field artillery specialist with A Company. Looking around at the hugs, kisses and tears, Steed said, "I don't want to disappoint any of these families. I hope we can bring everyone back home."

Spc. Mark Foreman, a cook with Headquarters Company, 648th Engineer Battalion, in Statesboro said that while deployment may be a hardship for a part-time soldier, it is also a matter of duty and honor.

see *Citizen Soldiers* on page 6

Photo Highlights from "Supermarket" 2004 on pages 7-10

Administration Seeks \$70.8 Billion for VA in 2006

VA News Release February 2005

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson announced today that President Bush will seek a record \$70.8 billion in the fiscal year 2006 budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), with the overwhelming majority of these resources targeted for health care and disability compensation.

“This budget demonstrates the President’s ongoing commitment to provide the very best health care and benefits to those veterans who count on VA the most,” Nicholson said.

The FY ’06 budget proposal calls for \$33.4 billion in discretionary funding — mostly for health care — and \$37.4 billion in mandatory funding, mostly for compensation, pension and other benefit programs. This represents an increase of 2.7 percent over this year’s discretionary budget.

FY ’06 Budget Highlights

This budget proposal guarantees that the department will be able to care for

those veterans who count on VA the most.

- With this budget proposal, the President, working in partnership with Congress, will have increased health care funding for veterans by 47 percent since FY ’01.
- The budget ensures continuation of the Presidential priority where VA is working closely with the Department of Defense to ensure that service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and their families are provided timely, high-quality services.
- VA will be able to care for more than 5.2 million patients. With this budget, the department will be able to care for a record number of our high-priority patients, those veterans counting on us the most, including veterans of Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom.
- The FY ’06 budget proposal includes \$750 million for the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) program, bringing the total department investment to date to \$2.15 billion. The FY ’06 proposal includes 28 new outpatient clinics, funding for design work for two new medical facilities in

Biloxi, Miss., and Fayetteville, Ark., as well as additional funding for five other major construction projects in Las Vegas, Nev.; Cleveland, Ohio; Pittsburgh, Pa.; Gainesville, Fla., and Anchorage, Alaska.

- The FY ’06 budget request calls for a total investment of \$2.2 billion in enhanced mental health services, which is \$100 million above this year’s funding level. This budget proposal ensures a full continuum of care for veterans with mental health issues, to include comprehensive treatment for those veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.
- The FY ’06 budget calls for \$1.2 billion for prosthetics and sensory aids, a \$100 million increase over FY ’05.
- Funding for non-institutional long-term care would increase by more than 18 percent over FY ’05, with a total investment of \$400 million in the President’s proposed budget.
- Continuing the largest expansion of the national cemetery system since the Civil War, the FY ’06 budget proposal includes \$90 million for construction projects,

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VA Spends Over \$1.85 Billion in Georgia

SDVS News Release, January 2005

According to fiscal year figures recently obtained from the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Georgia veterans who qualified under federal law shared in over \$1.85 billion in VA benefits during 2004.

“VA funds for Georgia veterans and their dependents who qualified have increased by some \$100 to \$150 million a year since 2000,” says Georgia Commissioner of Veterans Affairs Pete Wheeler.

“This is great news for those veterans and dependents receiving VA money, due largely to the fact that these paid benefits are tax exempt,” notes Commissioner Wheeler. “This is especially helpful for those living on fixed incomes.”

The FY 2004 figures showed a one year increase of 9.5 % in federal VA dollars into Georgia. The increase included \$15.5 million in additional health care assistance, \$63.4 million more in pension and compensation money, and an increase of \$28 million in education benefits.

During 2004, about 135,000 Georgia veterans received health care through the VA’s Medical Centers and Outpatient Clinics located in the state while some 130,000 monthly disability compensation or pension payments were made from the VA to veterans and veterans’ survivors. And more than 25,000 veterans, reservists, and dependents of veterans used the Montgomery GI Bill to help pay for their education.

“There are many others (veterans) who do not realize they may be entitled to receive monthly compensation for health conditions incurred in the service many years ago,” Commissioner Wheeler points out. “In addition, many veterans are unaware that combat service is not required to receive disability compensation or that they can request a compensation claim be reopened for reconsideration or an increase rating.”

As of September 2004, VA estimates Georgia’s veteran population at 760,323.

“Jim” Nicholson New VA Secretary

R. James “Jim” Nicholson was nominated by President George W. Bush to serve as Secretary of Veterans Affairs on December 9, 2004, and was unanimously confirmed by the Senate on January 26, 2005. He was sworn into office on February 1, 2005.

As Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Mr. Nicholson is the principal advocate for veterans in the U.S. government, ensuring that they receive the care, support, recognition and dignity they deserve for their service to our country. He also directs the Department of Veterans Affairs, the federal government’s second largest Cabinet Department, responsible for a nationwide system of health care services, benefits programs, and national cemeteries for America’s veterans and dependents.

With a budget of more than \$69 billion for fiscal year 2005, VA employs approximately 230,000 people at hundreds of VA medical centers, clinics, nursing homes, benefits offices, and national cemeteries throughout the country.

Georgia Commissioner of Veterans Affairs Pete Wheeler commended the confirmation of Nicholson. “A proven leader,” he stated. “Secretary Nicholson’s experience and

background are a tremendous plus for the VA... affective and efficient... he understands D.C.”

Prior to his nomination, Mr. Nicholson served as U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, a position he held since 2001, where he became a well-known advocate in



Rome for the elevation of human dignity, giving special emphasis to human trafficking, religious freedom, starvation and bio-tech food, HIV/AIDS, and international terrorism.

He was knighted by Pope John Paul II in October 2003 for this work representing the U.S. to the Vatican.

Mr. Nicholson was born in 1938 and grew up on a tenant farm in northwest Iowa in a family of seven children. He is a 1961 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. He served eight years on active duty as a

paratrooper and Ranger-qualified Army officer, then 22 years in the Army Reserve, retiring with the rank of colonel. While serving in Vietnam, he earned the Bronze Star Medal, Combat Infantryman Badge, the Meritorious Service Medal, Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry and two Air Medals.

Mr. Nicholson earned a master’s degree from Columbia University in New York, and a law degree from the University of Denver. He practiced law in Denver, specializing in real estate, municipal finance and zoning law. In 1978 he founded Nicholson Enterprises, Inc., a developer of planned residential communities, and in 1987 he bought Renaissance Homes, which became an award-winning builder of quality custom homes.

In January 1986, Mr. Nicholson was elected committeeman from Colorado for the Republican National Committee (RNC). In 1993 he was elected vice-chairman of the RNC, and in January 1997, he was elected chairman of the RNC, where he served for four years, through the elections of 2000.

Mr. Nicholson is married to the former Suzanne Marie Ferrell of Highland Falls, New York, who is an accomplished artist. They are the parents of three adult children.

Budget Continued

including funds for the purchase of land for six new national cemeteries in Bakersfield, Calif.; Birmingham, Ala.; Columbia-Greenville, S.C.; Jacksonville, Fla.; Sarasota, Fla.; and southeastern Pennsylvania; and expansion of the Fort Rosecrans Annex in Miramar, Calif. The budget also includes \$32 million for new state cemetery grants.

FY '06 Budget Highlights for the Veterans Health Administration

The Veterans Health Administration has received record budget increases over the last four years. With this budget proposal,

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the President, working in partnership with Congress, will have increased health care funding for veterans by more than 47 percent since FY '01. The President’s FY '06 budget proposal requests \$30.7 billion for VA’s health care program.

With these resources, VA will be able to treat more than 5.2 million patients. In 2006, nearly 80 percent of veteran patients are expected to be high priority – those veterans who count on VA the most.

The President’s budget request also includes \$750 million to continue the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced

Services (CARES) program designed to modernize VA’s health care system. The FY '06 proposal brings the total department investment to date to \$2.15 billion. This historic transformation means that VA will be able to provide greater access to high-quality care closer to where most veterans live. For the last five years, the independent American Customer Satisfaction index found veterans were happier than most Americans with the health care they receive. In December, a study by the prestigious RAND

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VA Awards Contract to Build Georgia National Cemetery

VA News Release December 2004

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced in December the award of a \$27.7 million contract to J. M. Wilkerson Construction Company, Inc., of Marietta, Ga., for construction of the Georgia National Cemetery. This new national cemetery will be located on 775 acres in Cherokee County, along state Route 20, west of Canton, Ga.

"This award shows America's commitment to honor its promise to our veterans," said Former Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi. "This new national cemetery will meet the burial needs of veterans well into the

future."

The first phase of construction calls for the development of 135 acres of the property that will create more than 29,000 full-casket gravesites consisting of both pre-placed crypts and traditional casket gravesites, plus a 3,000-unit columbarium and 3,000 burial sites for cremated in-ground remains.

The project also includes two committal service shelters, a public information center, a public assembly area for ceremonies and an infrastructure system of roads, irrigation, and maintenance and administration facilities.

Construction is expected to be

completed by late 2007. Burials in a small section are scheduled to begin by the end of 2005.

Veterans with a discharge other than dishonorable, their spouses and dependent children are eligible for burial in a national cemetery. Other burial benefits for eligible veterans include a burial flag, a Presidential Memorial Certificate, and a government-furnished headstone or marker – even if the veteran is not buried in a national or state veterans cemetery.

In the midst of the largest expansion since the Civil War, VA operates 120 national cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico, and 33 soldiers' lots and monument sites. More than three million Americans – including veterans of every war and conflict, from the Revolutionary War to the war in Iraq – are buried in VA's national cemeteries. VA also provides grants to states to build new or expand existing state veterans cemeteries to complement national cemeteries.

Information on the Georgia National Cemetery is available by calling (770) 479-9300.



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

December 6, 2004

Mr. Pete Wheeler
Commissioner, Georgia Department
of Veterans Services
Floyd Veterans Memorial Building, Ste. E970
Atlanta, GA 30334

Dear Mr. Wheeler:

It is my pleasure to inform you that the Department of Veterans Affairs will be awarding a construction contract for the new Georgia National Cemetery, located in Cherokee County, Georgia. The project will provide for 29,000 first interment gravesites, as well as over 6,000 sites for the interment of cremated remains.

Features incorporated into the project are as follows: an early turnover phase containing four burial sections for the accommodation of 6,600 first interment gravesites; a public information and rest room facility; maintenance and administration facilities; a public assembly area; and two committal service shelters. Infrastructure features to support cemetery operations will consist of potable and irrigation water distribution; roads, including a 200-foot bridge; electrical and mechanical systems, and other utilities; signage; site furnishings; fencing; and landscaping.

The firm selected for this project is J. M. Wilkerson Construction Co., Inc., of Marietta, Georgia. The contract amount is \$27,734,000. The full project is to be completed 900 days from the issuance of the notice to proceed. Funding for the project was appropriated in fiscal year 2002.

Should you require additional information, please have a member of your staff contact Ms. Kathleen Sullivan, Congressional Relations Officer, at (202) 273-5615.

Sincerely yours,

Anthony J. Principi



Department of Veterans Service
Floyd Veterans Memorial Building
Atlanta, Georgia
30334

PETER WHEELER
COMMISSIONER
(404) 656-2300
FAX (404) 656-7006

December 14, 2004

The Honorable Anthony J. Principi
United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Thank you for your letter of December 6, 2004 regarding the new Georgia National Cemetery located in Cherokee County, Georgia. We are happy to receive this information.

This letter gives me an opportunity to thank you for the many outstanding things you have accomplished for the veterans of America. I will remember and always appreciate the many things you have done for me and also the veterans of Georgia. We regret that you will be leaving the Veterans Administration and want you to know that you carry with you our great respect and appreciation for the many things you have accomplished. Please call me any time you are in the vicinity of Atlanta and anytime I can ever be of any service to you. We look forward to visiting with you in the future.

Your old friend,

Georgia Commission on the Holocaust

Cordially invites you to attend the Official State Observance

“A Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Holocaust”

Friday, May 6, 2005

12 Noon

State Capitol Building Rotunda

Atlanta

Veterans will be recognized and honored

Recognizing All Who Served between July 1, 1958 and May 7, 1975

Tribute to the Vietnam War Generation to Take Place in May

In observance of the 30th anniversary marking the end to the Vietnam War, the Georgia Veterans Leadership Program (GVLP) will host a series of events dedicated to recognizing Georgia veterans and their families involved in the Vietnam Conflict/War. These events, with the Vietnam War Memorial “Moving Wall” as a centerpiece, will take place May 4-8, 2005, at Georgia International Horse Park in Conyers, GA.

The GVLP is a non-profit organization that has been working for more than 25 years coordinating public events to enhance the public image and perception of the military, veterans and their families. GVLP initiated the resolution that was recently passed by the Georgia General Assembly commending Vietnam Veterans and their families and recognizing May 4-8, 2005, as the state’s official tribute to the anniversary observance to the end of the Vietnam War.

The “Moving Wall” is an authentic half-size replica of the Vietnam Memorial located in Washington, D.C. It is 252 feet in length and lists the names of the 58,228 men and women who lost their lives in the Vietnam War.

The “Wall” will be available for viewing 24 hours a day throughout the weekend and be the center for many of the weekend recognition events.

PLANNED EVENTS

Wednesday, May 4	10 a.m.	Opening Ceremony
	8 p.m.	Candlelight Ceremony
Thursday, May 5	4 p.m.	Honoring POW/MIA and their families
Friday, May 6	4 p.m.	Salute to Georgia National Guard and Reservists
Saturday, May 7	10 a.m.	Parade, Honoring Vietnam War Generation
	7 p.m.	“Vietnam Veteran Appreciation Night” at Turner Field (Atlanta Braves vs. Houston Astros)
Sunday, May 8	9 a.m.	Memorial Service at 1 st Baptist Church of Conyers “Reading of Georgia’s Unaccounted . . .”
	2 p.m.	Closing Ceremony; Salute to Gold Star Wives & Mothers

In addition to the daily events, there will be military static displays and booths, concerts, and lectures by state and nationally known speakers, all designed to enhance the image of and educate the general public about the Vietnam Era veteran and their families. ***GIHP and all events will be open free to the public throughout the weekend.***

For more information about GVLP’s “Tribute to the Vietnam War Generation” or other Georgia Veterans Leadership Program, Inc., activities please contact Mr. Tommy Clack, GVLP’s Chairman/President, at (770) 786-2302.

Citizen Soldiers continued from Front:

"I work for the sheriff's department here in Statesboro as a jailer, and we've had to pick up and jail at least five AWOL personnel for the military. I personally believe that our deployment is about following your orders and honoring your obligation to your country," said Foreman. "When you sign on the dotted line and commit to be in the military, be man enough or woman enough to mean it."

Foreman's wife, Nadine, speaking just before her husband's departure, was supportive. "I'm proud he's willing to do this job," she said. "I think he and everyone else going are really special and courageous people to put their personal lives on hold to answer a call to go help people half a world away."

The impact of the brigade's call to active duty will be felt in communities far beyond the individual unit hometowns. Guardsmen often live miles distant from their units and willingly make the drive to their assigned units for weekend drills.

Before departing for Iraq sometime in mid-May, the soldiers will spend about three months at Fort Stewart training for their as yet undetermined mission. While there, they will be subjected to "Immersion Training" during which they will continuously live and work in combat conditions simulated to be as close as possible to



Prior to boarding to bus to Fort Stewart, Spc. Chris Barron, a combat medic with HQ Company, 1st Battalion, 121st Infantry kisses his wife Sheryl goodbye while their daughter Elizabeth watches. (Georgia National Guard photo by Sgt Jeff Lowry).

those they will encounter in Iraq.

Upon leaving Fort Stewart, the brigade

will spend about several weeks at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., where soldiers will practice their combat skills in a desert environment.

The Georgians are expected to deploy to Iraq for about a year. The state will host an official mobilization ceremony Saturday, May 14 at Fort Stewart.

In Winder, about 130 soldiers from Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 121st Infantry, gathered to prepare for the long trip from Northeast Georgia to the piney woods of Fort Stewart, their camouflaged fatigues in sharp contrast to the bright colors worn by the cadre of families there to send them off.

"I've been with the military for 17 years, so my family is used to me being gone, but just maybe not for this long, said Staff Sgt. Danny Sallad of Milledgeville, a platoon motor sergeant. "It's really hard to leave the family. I feel loved to have a family that understands and supports me."

Spc. Ian Arrington of Winder, a combat medic with the unit who works as a Barrow County EMT, said he has strong convictions about the mission.

"I believe in what we're doing over there," he said. "I just want to take care of my guys, and make sure they come home safe with 10 fingers and 10 toes."



A National Guardsman from Service Battery, 1st Battalion, 118th Field Artillery, gives a thumbs-up to the crowd as his unit rolls out of Brunswick on its way to Fort Stewart, where the Guard unit will train for duty in Iraq. (Georgia National Guard photo by Spc. Curtis Porter)

DOD supports You Web Site Links American Public with the Troops

Last Fall, the Department of Defense launched a nationwide program, "America Supports You," and new Web site to showcase the many activities taking place across the nation in support of the troops. The Web site, which highlights organizations and individuals coordinating local and national efforts, has logged nearly a million hits since its inception. Individual citizens, business, schools, veterans groups and others have visited the site <http://www.AmericaSupportsYou.mil> to register their activities, send a message to the troops and identify programs of support in their own communities.

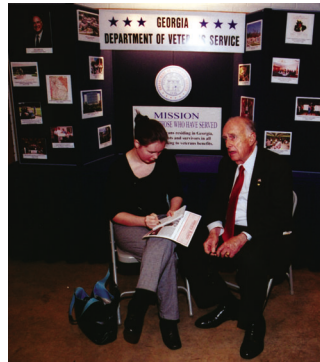
Allison Barber, deputy assistant secretary of defense for internal communications and public liaison, and that while the Department of Defense knew that many of these programs existed, "the 'America Supports You' Web site has proven to be a useful tool helping to link people and programs, and more importantly, to share these stories of support with the people who need to hear them most-the men and women serving overseas. The feedback from our troops has been tremendous, just as the outpouring of support from the American people has been overwhelming."

Americans can join "America Supports You" by visiting the site and registering their activities, large or small, in support of the troops. Everyone who registers receive an official "America Supports You" dog tag that people can wear as a visible symbol of support for the troops. The dog tags have seen across the country, worn by celebrities and at national events.

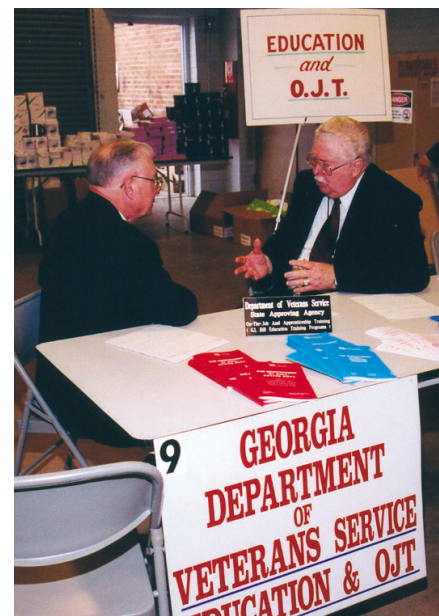
Barber also suggests that businesses, schools, churches, corporation and individuals add the link to their website. "Service members and their families have told us how much they are inspired by the messages of support from all across the nation that are posted each day. Whether you post a message on the site, or team up with a local group organizing care packages each and every activity sends the message loud and clear: "America Supports You."

Highlights From “Supermarket” 2004

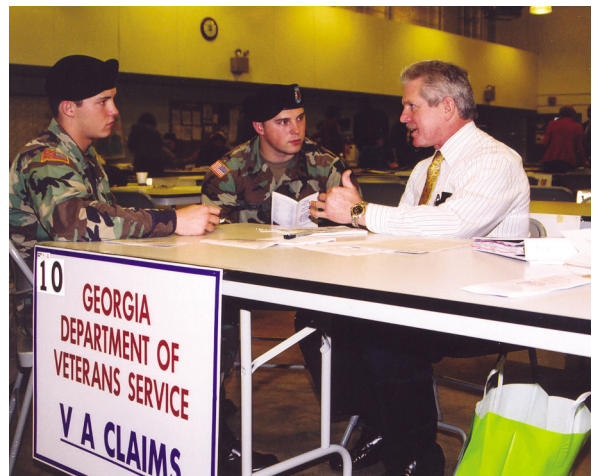
Tuesday, December 7



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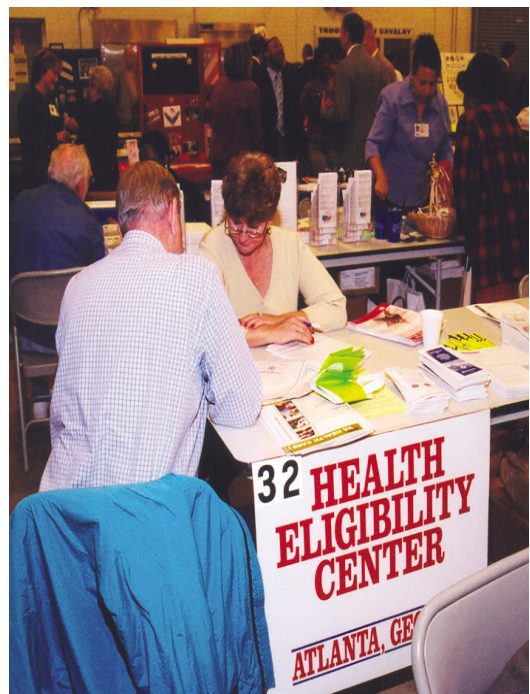
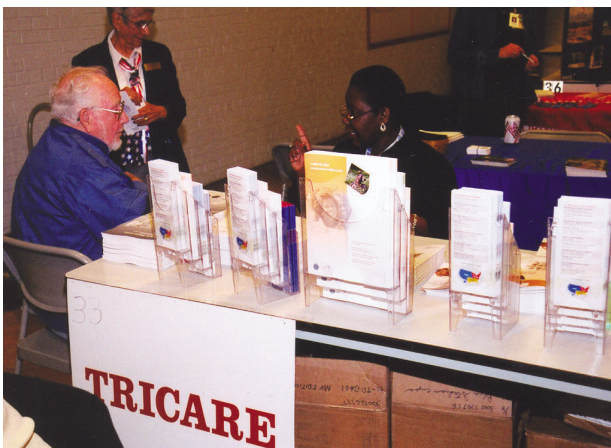
Some members of Troop E, 108th CAV "At Ease" with Commissioner Wheeler were (from left to right) SGT Wyatt New of Bethlehem, SGT George Brooks of Warner Robins, 1SGT Stephen Jones of Griffin, Specialist David Olmstead, Jr. of Newnan, Specialist Michael Cromer of Milner, and SSG Ricky Todd of Griffin.



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Photos By Roy Hamby, Manager
Blairsville and Brian Zeringue,
Public Information Manager



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Budget From Page 3

Corporation reported that VA patients were also significantly more likely than non-VA patients to receive needed preventative care.

FY '06 Budget Highlights for the Veterans Benefits Administration

The President's budget proposal for FY '06 will enable the Veterans Benefits Administration to maintain record increases in educational assistance and home loan programs.

Continuing the nation's long-standing commitment to provide educational benefits to veterans, service members and certain family members of veterans, the department will continue to offer veterans and service members educational assistance up to \$1,004 per month – a record amount – for full-time education or training in an approved institution. VA's support to service members and veterans purchasing or improving homes through the home loan guaranty program will remain at record levels. VA is now guarantying home loans with no down payment of nearly \$360,000 for eligible veterans, up from the \$240,000 maximum last year. Vocational rehabilitation and employment benefits for service-disabled veterans will increase by \$64 million in FY '06, which is 11 percent more than FY '05. Men and women still on

active duty will find it easier to access VA benefits when they near the end of their military service because of the enhancements in the FY '06 budget proposal for VA programs that allow early application for disability claims and other benefits.

FY '06 Budget Highlights for the National Cemetery Administration

Over the past four years, the President has committed to the largest expansion of the national cemetery system since the Civil War. To this end, the FY '06 budget calls for \$290 million, nearly \$17 million, or 6.4 percent, more than the level for FY '05. The FY '06 budget proposal calls for \$90 million for construction projects, including funds for the purchase of land for six new national cemeteries in the areas of Bakersfield, Calif.; Birmingham, Ala.; Columbia-Greenville, S.C.; Jacksonville, Fla.; Sarasota, Fla.; and southeastern Pennsylvania. The 2006 budget also includes funds for cemetery expansion and improvement at the Fort Rosecrans Annex in Miramar, Calif., and \$32 million for the state cemetery grant program. The share of veterans living within 75 miles of a national or state veterans cemetery will increase to more than 82 percent in 2006, which means that about 1.7 million more veterans will have access to a burial option

in 2006 than in 2004.

FY '06 Budget Highlights for Legislative Proposals

The President's 2006 budget includes legislative proposals that will further ensure VA is able to care for those veterans who count on it the most. The proposals include:

- ending all copayments for former prisoners of war;
- ending copayments for hospice care;
- authorizing VA to pay for emergency room care or urgent care for enrolled veterans in non-VA medical facilities;
- allowing more resources to be devoted to the homeless providers grant and per diem program;
- establishing a priority system for veterans receiving care in state veterans homes;
- increasing pharmacy copayments from \$7 to \$15 for a 30-day supply of drugs; and
- *
 - establishing an annual enrollment fee of \$250.*

** These proposals ask that non-disabled, higher income veterans (Priority 7 and 8 veterans) assume a small share of the cost of their health care, in line with amounts required of military retirees who have served at least 20 years in uniform or who were retired early due to service-related disabilities. Under no circumstances will a veteran make a copayment of any kind for the treatment of a service-connected condition.*



The Veterans of Foreign Wars, Department of Georgia, in cooperation with the Georgia Department of Veterans Service,

sponsored a training session last fall at the Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Office in Decatur.

This important training program called TRIP (Training, Responsibility, Involvement and Preparation of claims) will permit accreditation with VFW. This allows TRIP graduates to assist

veterans that have chosen the VFW as their Power of Attorney with the VA.

The following Veterans Service Officers of the Georgia Department of Veterans Service successfully completed the requirements for the TRIP accreditation: Ed Chancey-Brunswick; Ed Kent-Valdosta; Roger Freeman-Waycross; Craig Couturier-Cordele; Carl Wilson-Savannah; Barbara Johns-Augusta; Ernie Simons-Milledgeville; Harry Evans-Gainesville; Hope Mincer-Carrollton; Robert Turner-Cedartown; Jack Goodwin-Cartersville; Jay Johnson-Canton; George Canavaggio-Macon; and Dale Bell-Athens.

Law Increases Survivor Benefit Plan Annuity for Beneficiaries over 62

Army Echoes Jan-Apr 2005

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 05 (NDAA 05) makes the biggest change to the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) since the plan started in 1972. SBP is a program that let retirees choose to receive reduced retired pay so that their elected beneficiary can receive an annuity after the death of the retiree. Without SBP, retired pay stops when the retiree dies.

Under the new law, SBP annuitants will no longer have their benefits reduced from 55% to 35% of the base amount at age 62. After April 1, 2008, SBP annuitants will receive 55% of the base amount elected, with cost-of-living adjustments, regardless of age. The base amount is the part of retired pay that the retiree elects to cover. The base amount can range from \$300 a month to full retired pay.

This change is being phased in over the next three years. NDAA 05 will raise the minimum SBP

annuity for survivors age 62 and older to 40% of the base amount covered as of Oct. 1, 2005; to 45% of the base amount on Apr. 1, 2006; to 50% on Apr. 1, 2007; and to 55% on Apr. 1, 2008.

Open Enrollment Period

Because of this major change, Congress declared a one-year open season for retirees to elect SBP or increase their current coverage, running from Oct. 1, 2005 to Sep. 30, 2006.

The following are possible open season elections:

- Retirees who are not participating will be able to elect it.
- Retirees who elected SBP, but are covering less than full retired pay as their base amount will be able to increase the base amount.
- Retirees who have child only coverage will be able to add spouse or former spouse coverage to the child coverage and will be able to increase the base amount.

Retirees who want to elect or increase SBP coverage during the open season will have to pay a buy-in premium covering all the costs that would have been paid for the election if it had been made at the first opportunity to do so. Internet and any actuarial charges necessary may be added to this amount. The costs associated with the buy-in premium have not been determined, but they will be posted at <http://www.dfas.mil> and <http://armyg1.army.mil/retire> as soon as they are available.

Retirees who make an open season election must live for two years following the election for it to become effective. If the retiree dies before the end of the two-year period, the open season election will become void and all costs resulting from the new election will be refunded to the names beneficiary of the voided open season election.

VetBiz Assistance Program Pages

The Center for Veterans Enterprise of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has developed an electronic web site to register assistance programs available to veteran entrepreneurs.

VA's Center for Veterans Enterprise has created the VetBiz Assistance Program Pages (APP), an Internet tool which will enable veterans to quickly locate community resources to help them start or expand a business. The database is offered as a no-charge tool to our resource partners who provide assistance services in either the public or private sectors. Visit the website at www.app.vetbiz.gov.



On January 13th, Commissioner Wheeler took part in VA's official installation ceremony for Larry Burks (middle), the new director of it's Atlanta Regional Office at 1700 Clairmont Road, Decatur. Shown here with Commissioner and Mr. Burks is Tom Cappello, Director of Atlanta VA Medical Center, located across the street at 1670 Clairmont Road.



On January 10th, Kenneth W. Birdsong of Gordon (front row center), one of Georgia's longest serving and most distinguished state legislators, was sworn in as a member of the State Veterans Service Board by Governor Sonny Perdue. Among the many who attended the swearing in ceremony in the Governor's office were (from left to right), front row, State Senator Cecil Staton of Macon, VSB Member Fred Fincher of LaGrange, VFW State Commander Randy Coggins of Riverdale, Dianne Hodges of Twiggs County, Mrs. Elaine Birdsong, Alexandria Hardin of Jones County, Commissioner Wheeler, VFW State Adjutant John Gwizdak of Stockbridge, Jackie Birdsong of Twiggs County, Caroline Freeman of Bibb County, Roger Birdsong of Twiggs County; second row, Ike Liston of Jones County, Kathryn Fioretti of Jones County, Carol and Art Silsby of Wilkerson County, Fulton Howell of Jones County, Buddy Greene of Jones County, Angela and State Representative Allen Freeman of Bibb County; third row, Jones County Commissioner Bert Liston, Billy Moore of Jones County, State Representative Pete Warren of Augusta, Rev. Wes Hardin of Jones County, and Lamar Miller of Jones County. Birdsong's appointment to the Veterans Service Board followed his retirement from government after 28 years of continuous service in the State House.

Could You Be Eligible for CRSC?

Army Echoes Jan-April 2005

Could you be eligible for the Combat-Related Special Compensation (CRSC) benefit? CRSC is a tax-free benefit available for retirees with 20 years of service and disabilities rated by the VA at 10% or more, resulting directly from contact including armed conflict hazardous military duty, training exercises or an instrumentality of war. Members retired because of a disability with less than 20 years of service are **not** eligible.

Unlike other benefits, **retirees need to apply in order to receive CRSC.** The Army's CRSC Division has received more than 35,000 applications (including re-considerations) for this benefit, but the Division believes many more Army retirees could be eligible and wants to make sure that every retiree who is eligible applies. They note that of the \$22 billion set aside by Congress to pay for this benefit for all services, only \$489 million has been awarded.

Note: Because of the volume of applications received, the CRSC Division did have a backlog; however, they expect that all applications older than 30 days will have been processed by Feb.6.

You can view the weekly processing applications at <http://www.crsc.army.mil/utilities/stats.htm>.

For more information or to obtain an application packet, visit <http://www.crsc.army.mil>; or contact your local RSO; or call the Army's CRSC Service Center toll Free at 1-866-281-3245; or (703) 325-5163, Monday to Friday, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

DFAS Reports CRSC Payment Status

Army Echoes Jan-April 2005

The Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS) has completed processing the backlog of more than 9,000 approved CRSC retroactive payments, older than 60 days, to qualified military retirees.

CRSC applications will normally be paid within 60 days of military service approval. DFAS is working on automating CRSC payments to improve that service and expects to have automation completed by summer 2005.

The backlog was created when legislation, passed in June 2003 and January 2004, added

entitlements that required additional policy and coordination among the military services, the VA and DFAS before certain CRSC payments could begin.

The legislation changed the entitlements to include the following consideration, which required additional time to process because of their complexity:

- Court-ordered garnishments
- Deductions for former spouses
- Disabled retirees whose pay is computed using the percentage of disability instead of years of service
- Multiple changes in the awarded

disability since the inception of CRSC.

Since April 2004, DFAS has received almost 2,000 approved application every month. As of Dec. 29, 2004 more than 26,000 military retirees have received CRSC payments totaling about \$489 million.

More information is available from DFAS at <http://www.dfas.mil.money/retired/crscindex.htm>, 1-800-321-1080; (216) 522-5955; or from the Army CRSC branch at <http://www.crsc.army.mil>; or 1-866-281-3254; or (703) 325-5163.

VA “FY2004 Annual Performance and Accountability Report”

The VA “FY2004 Annual Performance and Accountability Report,” confirms that VA is delivering high-quality health care, benefits and memorial services to the nation’s veterans.

The report shows that the number of veterans using VA’s health care system rose dramatically, increasing from 3.8 million in FY 2000 to 5.1 million in FY 2004. Despite this increase, VA continued to receive high satisfaction ratings from its patients with scores of 74 percent for inpatients and 72 percent for outpatients. Ninety four percent of primary care patients and 93 percent of specialty care patients were able to schedule an appointment within 30 days of their desired date last year – improvements over 2003. The report documents high customer satisfaction in memorial affairs, as well. Ninety-four

percent of survey respondents rated the quality of service received at VA’s 120 national cemeteries as “excellent.”

Benefits processing and delivery improved in spite of growing workloads. In FY 2004, over 2.5 million veterans received compensation benefits for disabilities incurred in or aggravated during military service. One of VA’s top priorities is to process claims in a timely manner. In FY 2004, more than 700,000 disability claims were processed, and an additional 750,000 beneficiaries received decisions on claims not requiring a rating decision.

Veterans and their families also received their decisions more quickly – in an average of 166 days for those requiring a disability rating, compared to 223 days in FY 2002 and 182 days in FY 2003.

The report is on the web at www.va.gov/budget/report.



Last Fall, the Augusta VA Medical Center was recognized at the 2004 Georgia Oglethorpe Conference and Awards Banquet held in Atlanta, Georgia, for successfully completing the 2004 Georgia Focus Recognition Self-Assessment Tool. This is the first step in a three-tiered process working toward the Georgia Oglethorpe Award, which uses the same guidelines and criteria as the National Baldrige Quality Award. By participating in this process, the Augusta VA Medical Center joins an elite group of organizations and businesses intent on measuring and improving its performance.

In a congratulatory letter to the Augusta VA Medical Center, Georgia’s Governor Sonny Perdue stated, “On behalf of all tax paying citizens, I acknowledge your efforts to become more active and efficient. I would like to see every organization in Georgia become world class, and I believe the Georgia Focus Recognition Self Assessment Tool to be an excellent way to begin this journey.”

The HireVetsFirst.gov web site is now live!

The President’s National Hire Veterans Committee is pleased to announce that the <http://www.HireVetsFirst.gov> web site is now available. The site provides information on the Hire Vets First Initiative and directs business interested in hiring veterans to America’s Service Locator http://www.servicelocator.org/nearest_onestop.asp or to 1-877-US2-JOBS to find their closest One Stop Career Center for services. The web site also refers veterans to their nearest one-stop Career Center Via the same methods.

Tricare Benefits Improved Significantly For Reservists

Defense Link News Release, Oct.2004

The National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal 2005, signed by the President last fall, improves significantly the overall health benefits available to guardsmen, reservists and their families and makes permanent several of the Tricare benefits authorized “temporarily” under defense legislation last year while extending secretarial authorization for others.

For reserve component members with delayed effective date orders to serve on active duty in support of a contingency operation for more than 30 days, the new legislation permanently authorizes Tricare eligibility for up to 90 days prior to member’s activation date for eligible members and their families. It also makes permanent a 180-day transitional Tricare health benefit after deactivation for Transitional Assistance Management Program (TAMP) eligible members and their families. Members must also now receive a comprehensive physical examination prior to separating from active duty service.

The legislation also authorizes waiver of the Tricare standard and extra deductibles of reserve component family members for members ordered to active

duty for more than 30 days and authorizes Tricare to pay nonparticipating providers up to 115 percent of the Tricare maximum allowable charge, which enhances continuity of care for these family members with their civilian providers. In order to ensure seamless implementation of these provisions, Tricare has extended the Tricare Reserve Family Demonstration Project through Oct. 31, 2005. The demonstration, which began on Sept. 14, 2001, was due to end Nov. 1, 2004.

Members of the reserve component called after Sept. 11, 2001, to serve for more than 30 days in support of a contingency operation, who served or will continuously serve for 90 or more days, are now given the opportunity to purchase Tricare standard healthcare coverage for themselves and their family members after they demobilize. The member must sign an agreement to continue serving for a period of one year or more in the selected reserve after their active duty ends. For every 90 days of consecutive active duty service, the member and family member may purchase one year of Tricare standard coverage for the same period they commit to serve in the selected reserves. Members will be able to purchase the new Tricare standard coverage

on a self-only or self and family basis. The Tricare standard coverage under this program will begin once the member’s eligibility for 180 days of transitional Tricare coverage under the TAMP program ends. Members who served on active duty in support of a contingency operation for 90 days or more on or after Sept. 11, 2001, and were released from active duty before Oct. 28, 2004, or within 180 days of that date, may enter into an agreement to serve continuously in the selected reserve for a period of one or more years and begin participation in this program at that time.

These members must enter into this agreement to serve in the selected reserve within one year of Oct. 28, 2004.

Congress requires implementation of the new Tricare standard enrollment program by April 26, 2005.

Additional information on the new permanent Tricare provisions to include start dates, benefits and requirements under each of the new permanent provisions will be posted on the Tricare web site at <http://www.tricare.osd.mil/> and the reserve affairs Web site at <http://www.defenselink.mil/ra> as soon as each is ready to begin.

2004 Veterans' Health Improvement Act

On November 30, 2004, President Bush signed Public Law 108-422, The Veterans Health Improvement Act of 2004 (VHIA). This law combined two different pieces of legislation, the Senate's Department of Veterans Affairs Real Property and Facilities Management Improvement Act (S.2485) and the House of Representatives' Veterans Health Programs Improvement Act of 2004 (H.R. 3936).

Homeless Veterans

VA has estimated that there are at least 345,000 homeless veterans in America on any given night. Approximately 40 percent of homeless veterans suffer from mental illness, and 80 percent have alcohol or other drug abuse problems. A growing percentage of homeless veterans are women as larger numbers of women answer the call to serve.

VHIA re-authorizes and increases from \$75 million to \$99 million the annual appropriations for homeless veterans' programs through fiscal year 2008.

State Veterans Homes

The average age of veteran in this country is now 54 years. State Veterans' Homes are critical part of the care of elderly veterans in this country and will play an ever-increasing role as the aging veteran population increases. VA's inpatient nursing home bed count now stands at 8500. VA pays State Veterans Home \$59 per day per veteran for care. This payment is known as the State Veterans Homes Per Diem.

Medicaid is a state/Federal cost sharing program for the medically needy and is the single largest financing source for nursing home care in this country. Many veterans who receive the VA Per Diem also receive Medicaid payments to State Veterans Homes for aging veterans require that the State Veterans home return the VA Per Diem to the state Medicaid Fund, considering the Per Diem a third-party payment. VHIA clarifies that Per Diem payments by VA for the care of veterans in State Veterans Homes shall not be used to offset or reduce other payments made to assist veterans. State Homes should benefit greatly from funding from both sources.

Veterans Currently in Long Term Care Pilot Programs

Under VHIA, VA may authorize any veteran who is currently receiving long-term care services under a pilot program established by the veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act of 1997 to continue to receive those services through December 31, 2005. This encompasses mostly non-institutional services such as geriatric evaluation, adult day health care, and home health care and assisted living pilot programs.

Hospice Care Co-payments

VHIA adds non-service connected veterans and enrolled Priority Group 8 veterans who are receiving hospice (end-of-life) care in VA facilities to the list of veterans from who VA may not collect co-payments. This provision eliminates a burden on the terminally ill family veteran and his or her family at the time when it is least appropriate.

Military Sexual Trauma Counseling

With the increasing numbers of women in the Armed Forces, The problem of military sexual trauma began to be recognized as early as the

1980's. Rape and other sexual crimes can result in Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Major Depression and other mental disorders. Congress mandated VA to start a pilot program to provide counseling to victims of these attacks by the Veterans Readjustment Counseling Service's Sexual Trauma Counseling Program in its 208 Vet Centers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands. VHIA makes sexual trauma counseling a permanent program in Vet Centers. VHIA also authorizes eligibility for this service for Reservists and National Guard veterans who were assaulted or otherwise sexually victimized while on Active Duty for training (ACDUTRA).

Polytrauma Centers

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars are resulting in U.S. casualties who have more and more severe injuries. Because of the high percentage of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan who are surviving multiple massive injuries, VHIA mandates VA to establish "Center for Research, Education and Clinical Activities on Complex Multi-trauma Associated with Combat Injuries."

The Centers will be established at VA Medical Centers that have expertise in traumatic amputation rehabilitation, spinal cord and traumatic brain injury and blind rehabilitation.

The focus will be on research and education of VA medical staff on clinical best practices, the long-term effects of and methods for treating complex multi-trauma, including referral and hometown follow-up. Under VHIA, VA may also assign certified rehabilitation registered nurses and blind rehabilitation specialists to work in Department of Defense Military Treatment Facilities to assess and co-ordinate the care of these severely wounded service-members. The Centers will be funded at \$7 million for fiscal year 2005 and \$8 million for fiscal years 2006 through 2008.

Medical Preparedness Centers

The reality of the possibility the use of biological, chemical and radiological weapons against our troops has led Congress to require VA to designate four facilities as Medical Preparedness Centers. These Centers would handle the casualties of nuclear, biological and chemical warfare. Sites for these centers will be selected based on assessment of proposals by scientific peer review panel, including experts in toxicology, infectious diseases, radiation and clinical care of persons exposed to such hazards. This project will be funded at \$10 million annually for fiscal years 2005 through 2007.

Medical Facilities Lease

Authorization

VHIA authorizes and appropriates funds for VA to enter into lease contracts for Community Based Outpatient Clinics in 16 cities at a cost to VA not to exceed \$24,420,000. Those cities are : Wilmington, NC; Greenville, SC; Norfolk, VA; Summerfield, FL; Knoxville, KY; Toledo, OH; Crown Point, IN; Fort Worth, TX; Plano, TX; San Antonio, TX; Corpus Christi, TX; Harlingen, TX; Denver, Co; Oakland, CA; and two clinics in San Diego, CA. VA is also authorized by VHIA to enter

into a 75-year lease at the Fitzsimmons Campus of the University of Colorado in Denver for a future VA Medical Center.

Department of Veterans Affairs Capital Asset Fund

CARES was designed to model the demand for veterans health care services through the years 2012 and 2022. In August, Secretary Principi announced his plan to relocate services and facilities to more closely match future needs. In implementing CARES, VA will be disposing of a great deal of surplus real property by selling, leasing or otherwise transferring it.

VHIA established the VA Capital Asset Fund with an initial "deposit" of \$10 million. It also closes the Nursing Home Revolving Fund and transfers any current un-obligated balance to the new Capital Asset Fund. The Fund is intended to be used to deposit monies generated through VA's disposal of properties under CARES. Money in the new Fund may be used by VA to pay for costs associated with the transfer of real estate, improvement projects costing less than \$4 million at existing VA facilities. This section also authorizes VA to transfer (sell or lease) surplus property at fair market value. If the transferee is a VA grant or per diem provider, such as a Homeless Veterans Shelter, the property may be transferred at no compensation to VA, but the property would revert to VA were it be used for any other purpose.

Nurse Recruitment Pilot Program

VIHA directs VA to establish a pilot program in an area of the country experiencing an acute nursing shortage to develop innovative recruitment techniques. Such techniques would include such private sector practices as employer branding, advertising, Internet technologies and use of recruitment agencies. In the area selected for the pilot, VA will now be able to use some of the same marketing techniques used by other major health care employers to attract quality nurses. The current hiring process would also be streamlined, so that once selected, candidates may be made timely job offers.

Public Law 108-422, The Veterans Health Improvement Act of 2004, may be viewed in its entirety by visiting <http://thomas.loc.gov/>.

Reunions

USS Steinaker DDR/DD 863 will hold its reunion April 21-24 2005 at The Town & Country Inn & Convention Center, in Charleston, SC.

For further information contact:

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SERVICE OFFICERS SCHOOL – 2005
Holiday Inn, Jekyll Island, Georgia

A G E N D A

TUESDAY, MAY 17, 2005

1:30 p.m. Registration

WEDNESDAY, MAY 18, 2005

9:00 a.m. Compensation-Pension-Education Benefits Panel
1:30 p.m. Employment-Reemployment-Civil Service Preference Panel
3:00 p.m. Military Retirement Benefits-National Cemetery System-
Social Security-TRICARE Benefits Panel

THURSDAY, MAY 19, 2005

9:00 a.m. Hospital-Medical Benefits Panel
1:30 p.m. Loan Benefits Panel
3:00 p.m. Insurance Panel

FRIDAY, MAY 20, 2005

9:00 a.m. Legal-Appeals Panel
12:00 Noon Adjourn



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GA Department of Veteran's Services
May 16 - 20, 2005

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Requested room type _____ Deposit enclosed \$ _____
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Floyd Veterans Memorial Building E-970
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Georgia Veterans Bulletin

The "Georgia Veterans Bulletin" is published quarterly by the Georgia Department of Veterans Service. Individuals or organizations can be placed on the mailing list by calling (404) 656-5933 or by writing to the Department of Veterans Service, Public Information Division, Floyd Veterans Memorial Building, Room E-970, Atlanta, GA 30334-4800, or e-mail us at ga.vet.svc@mindspring.com

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